



Interview / Entrevista / Entrevista

## Simon Zagorski-Thomas. *Studying How Sounds Were Made Rather Than How They Were Heard*

by Juliana Guerrero (Universidad de Buenos Aires-Conicet)\*

Simon Zagorski-Thomas is Professor of Music at the London College of Music, University of West London. He is co-chair of the Association for the Study of the Art of Record Production and co-director of the annual Art of Record Production Conference. He was recently awarded the main 2015 IASPM Prize for First Book in English with his book *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). He is co-editor of *The Art of Record Production* (Ashgate Press, 2012). Zagorski-Thomas was awarded a visiting fellowship at the University of Cambridge and was the Principal Investigator in the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded network on Performance in the Recording Studio. He has worked for over 30 years as a composer, sound engineer and producer and is, at present, conducting research into recorded popular music. Before entering academia he worked as a producer with artists such as Phil Collins, Bill Bruford, The Mock Turtles and Courtney Pine.

**Juliana Guerrero:** Since 2003 you have been working in a new academic field: the history and analysis of the Production of Record Music. As you have mentioned, your latest book “is a meta-text: a book that seeks to elaborate the nature of the academic subject itself rather than one that provides an in-depth analysis of any specific features” (2014: 1). Which are the relations that you recognize between this new academic field and the musicology, the ethnomusicology and the studies of popular music?

**Simon Zagorski-Thomas:** I think the development of the Art of Record Production (ARP) project is part of a wider trend in popular music studies (PMS) in which the practicalities of music making are starting to receive equal attention to the social, cultural

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and economic aspects of popular music. From the 1980s onwards, the initial thrust in PMS centred on these social, cultural and economic aspects alongside a parallel strand of analysis. In both cases, the perspective related to reception rather than production –either studying some aspect of audience activity or analysing the music from the perspective of the listener. There were, of course, exceptions, but this was the general trend. Historically, I think this stems from a general resistance from music departments in universities and conservatoires to allow popular music into the curriculum. PMS was mostly found in sociology and media studies departments. Music Technology and Audio Production courses at universities, because they often resided in computing and technology/engineering departments became established (in the UK and the USA in any event) more quickly and widely than popular music performance courses.

Before I started the Art of Record Production conference in 2005 I struggled to find appropriate outlets for the research I was just starting to conduct. When I was looking into recorded performance I presented at an ethnomusicology conference and a conference on Music & Gesture. In both instances I was virtually the only person studying western popular music. When I was looking at the analysis of recorded music, I presented at IASPM where I was one of the few people looking at how sounds were made rather than how they were heard. I also presented at a performance studies event where I was virtually the only person not looking at classical music. Having been exposed to these different research communities, I did realise how important it was to try and foster an inclusive approach to the Art of Record Production conferences. If we were going to develop as an academic field we needed to recognise and even cultivate and draw attention to our multi-disciplinary nature.

**JG:** Is there any methodological approach of these disciplines that you prefer?

**SZT:** All of my work is built upon a fundamental belief –although a belief founded on what I know of neuroscience– that our systems of perception and cognition can best be characterised through the ecological approach to perception and embodied cognition. That basic philosophy of knowledge informs everything I do. I do find, however, that there are lots of “macro” approaches to understanding music and creativity that are compatible with this approach and, in some cases, are even improved by being examined through the prisms of embodied cognition and the ecological approach to perception. This has led me towards Actor Network Theory, the Social Construction of Technology and, to a lesser extent, the systems approach to creativity. Although the first two of these are usually associated with technological and scientific systems, I think they are equally applicable to all other forms of musical activity and that is where I think my research focus is starting to head.

**JG:** What does an ecological perspective entail?

**SZT:** The ecological approach to perception is based on the idea that our perceptual systems have developed with the aim of providing a pragmatic assessment of what is happening within our immediate environment. In order to do this it is continually making connections between what James Gibson called invariant properties and affordances. Gibson worked primarily with vision perception but my approach is that all of the different modes of perception are linked at a very basic level. When I learn what my house is like, I learn what it looks, sounds, smell, feels and possibly even tastes like as a combined and simultaneous activity. Thus, for example, when I learn about the sound of reverberation, my understanding of it is built out of not just what it sounds like to be in a particular type of space but what it looks and feels like, what types of activity are possible in a space like that and so forth. I will also build a series of connections that link my idea of what the invariant properties of sound in a large space are –long reverb tails and increased bass frequencies for example– with the affordances that similar experiences have been associated with in the past –the types of activities that have been possible. Thus, the sound of large reverberant space is likely to be associated with particular visual shapes and the ability to move around– but it may also become associated with, for example, the sights, tastes and smells of organised religion if I grew up as a regular church goer.

**JG:** What are the advantages of adopting an ecological perspective for this new academic field?

**SZT:** It goes beyond being a matter of the advantages of using this perspective in this new academic field. The ecological perspective informs my thinking on how the human brain and body work and therefore all human activity has to be understood through this prism.

**JG:** I think you are not alone working from this perspective. How was the growth of this academic field?

**SZT:** Not only am I not alone but I was pre-dated by a lot of the scholarship that helped to form this academic field. Without scholars like Allan Moore, Will Moylan, Thomas Porcello, Timothy Taylor, Paul Theberge, Albin Zak and many others, there wouldn't have been any basis to build this “new academic field” on. At the start of the conference it wasn't that easy to build the research community around the conference but Katia Isakoff and I were lucky to get the help of many established scholars –Simon Frith, Will Moylan, Albin Zak, Paul Theberge and Nicholas Cook spring to mind but there have been many of them–

who helped to attract people and build a sense of both coherence and gravitas. There are all sorts of new challenges now about how to maintain the momentum of growth and how to balance industry involvement and academic rigour.

**JG:** You founded the Art of Record Production Conference in 2005 and the next year, Katia Isakoff and you established the *Journal on the Art of Record Production* (JARP), a peer reviewed online academic journal and then, in 2009, the Association for the Study of the Art of Record Production. How were these experiences in this last decade?

**SZT:** It has been very exciting and very fruitful. We had no idea how much work we were taking on when we started it but it has been hugely rewarding in lots of ways. I've met and had fascinating discussions with many wonderful people. As the Conference has moved around the world, I have traveled to many places that I might not otherwise have been. Most importantly, I think that being in the centre of the community has meant that I've been exposed to many more ideas –and from a wide range of disciplines– than I would if I'd only been reading and attending other conferences.

**JG:** The name of the new academic field stresses the production of the music, but which is the place for the hearing perspective? In the analysis, how do you manage the differences between a trained hear of the researcher and an ordinary hear of anyone that consumes the music?

**SZT:** There are two distinct questions here but they both go back to the issue of having a coherent idea about how music works. In my book I've tried to develop a coherent approach that would allow for a connected study of both production and reception (production in all senses of the word –record production but also composition and performance) through this approach to perception and cognition. I think that this approach also allows for a variety of perspectives to be valid –expert practitioner, researcher and casual listener– because it doesn't presuppose “meaning” in music but is based on opportunities and potentialities for interpretation.

**JG:** You said you are interested not only in popular music but also in academic music and you suggested your book is a personal manifesto about the nature of the music and the process of music-making. Could you explain in a bit more detail what this manifesto really means?

**SZT:** I don't think I used the term "academic music" but certainly did say that I was aiming to develop ideas that are applicable to all forms of music and not just recorded (western) popular music. The "manifesto" element arises because the approach I have adopted to the study of music isn't simply about selecting a particular set of theoretical and methodological tools. The nature of tools is such that they are designed based on an understanding of the nature of the material they are intended to work on. The tools of musical notation that have been used in western art music in recent centuries have helped to determine the way composers work, the way performers interpret those works and the instruments that are used to perform them. They have also determined the ways that musicologists have analysed them –ways that are based on structures that grow out of harmonic progressions built on relatively stable pitches and timbres. When you use the tools of notation to look at popular music, it tends to look simplistic because the elements where creativity lies in western art music, harmony and structure, tend to be the simple, static elements in popular music around which other vehicles for creativity exist, expressive pitch based and timbral variation for example –which are difficult or impossible to represent with notation. My aim, then, has been to contribute to the development of a toolset that can be applied across a range of musical styles. How successful it will be, either in terms of realising those aims or of becoming used more widely, remains to be seen –but that is what I meant when I called it a "personal manifesto".

**JG:** What happens when it is impossible to have access to this process (such as a case of a rock star, an isolated community or a past music)?

**SZT:** Well, that is the perennial problem of historical studies: that access to sources determines the contents and scope of the history books. On the other hand, I think it's true that access is never "impossible", only limited. We always have an idea of when something was recorded and usually where as well. That gives us a great deal of generic information about the types of processes that were prevalent at the time, the types of technology that were available and so forth. That allows a significant level of "reverse engineering" guesswork to take place that will be further informed by the content of the recording. So there is always some information and we always want more. We can only write about the history and ethnography of recorded music based on the data we have access to and that is always limited in one way or another.

**JG:** One of the milestones of your latest work, (*The Musicology of Record Production*), is the interaction between participants and the technology. What do you think about the contemporary forms of composing, like the streaming possibilities?

**SZT:** There are some very interesting developments going on in composition technology at the moment such as the collaborative use of browser-based DAWs [Digital Audio Workstations] and the continued integration of instrument technologies into DAWs. They offer a great deal in terms of creative potential and new types of workflow but they also tend to transfer a lot of the potential for decision making about the compositional process away from the composer and into the hands of the product designer. Of course, the same could be said of previous technologies such as music notation, equal tempered tuning and the piano – all technologies have properties that offer certain affordance for potential activity and shut down others. Composers (and producers) need to be aware of which affordances they are depriving themselves of when they choose technologies that provide other affordances. There is nothing inherently right or wrong / good or bad in the technologies –but I think it's always better to make an informed decision about which creative options you select and which ones you close down.

**JG:** From an analytic point of view, what are the differences between analysing an old recording like a wax cylinder using the best player for a wax cylinder built one hundred years ago and using a digital file of the music that it contains?

**SZT:** I think they are based on two different research questions. If for example, like Tia De Nora or Michael Bull, you are studying how audiences listened to music at a given point in time and point in space, or if you are studying the technology of production then you can learn more by listening on the technology used by the audience. If, on the other hand, you want to study the compositional or performance aspects of the music then you may learn more if you can somehow clean up the recording –removing the noise or distortion introduced by the medium.

**JG:** What kind of academic training do you think is necessary to study “The Musicology of Record Production”?

**SZT:** I think that the fascinating thing about the subject area is its interdisciplinarity. Someone with a background in ethnomusicology or anthropology will bring an entirely different perspective and set of skills than someone trained in the history of technology or the ergonomics of a human-computer interface. Obviously, if someone wants to study record production then it makes sense for them to learn about the technologies of production but I don't think that has to be their primary focus of study. The primary focus of study should relate to the way that the person wants to study production –the psychology of

production, the ergonomics of production, the social construction of production technology and so forth— these are aspects of a musicology of record production. Being good at record production isn't a pre-condition of studying it any more than being a good composer is for studying composition —but you have to have a working knowledge of the way that it works as well as how you want to study it.

**JG:** You describe yourself as an academic, a composer and a record producer. How do these three activities balance your research work?

**SZT:** I'm continually trying to find ways of making them work together because there obviously isn't time to have three separate careers running at the same time. During my PhD —which was in composition— I used my academic research into record production to develop new ideas about my composition technique and the two things worked together. My current research project involves the production of classical music in experimental ways and so I am getting to produce some tracks. The problem is that I never really have the time to do the composing and production as much as the academic research because that is how I earn my living. My composition is of very “un-popular music” and will never earn me a living and that is where my production interests also lie for the most part. So I am primarily an academic who attempts to make time and space for composition and production whenever I can.

**JG:** Thank you very much for this interview, is there anything you would like to add?

**SZT:** Well, I'd like to thank you too —and I'd like to encourage any of your readers who are interested in the academic study of recording, recorded music and record production to get involved in ASARP. At the moment our membership is too strongly focused on North America, Europe and Australasia and we would love to broaden that membership elsewhere. You can find out more at [www.artofrecordproduction.com](http://www.artofrecordproduction.com) or [www.arpjournal.com](http://www.arpjournal.com) or you can contact me directly via email or Facebook

### Bibliography

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**Biography / Biografía / Biografia**

Juliana Guerrero obtained her B.A. in Arts and her Ph.D. in Arts History and Theory (both at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina) with the doctoral dissertation “Music and humor in Les Luthiers” work (1967-2012)”. She holds a Teaching Assistant position at the University of Buenos Aires and a Postdoctoral Fellowship (National Scientific and Technical Research Council, Conicet). Currently she is participating in the research projects “Argentinean Popular Music” (UNLP, Argentina) and “Musical practices in training: an ethnomusicological study of theories and cases in intercultural situations” (UBA, Argentina).

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